



John Decaire (left) and Al Cornes are helping to teach the next generation of workers the importance of health and safety on the job.

Health and safety starts in the classroom

By Gord Woodward

A new project in B.C. high schools aims to help create the next generation of healthy and safe workers.

This spring, more than 100 secondaries around the province this spring joined the Day of Mourning BC Schools Project.

Designed for students who are, or soon will be, young workers, the project ties in to the national Day of Mourning, which remembers Canadians who have died on the job and promotes health and safety rights in the workplace.

“Young workers are a critical demographic,” explains Scott McCloy, WorkSafeBC’s director of government, community, and media relations. “Our research tells us

that young workers and new workers are far more vulnerable in the workplace than other workers.”

How vulnerable? Well, an average of 27 young workers have time-loss injuries every day in B.C. And an average of seven young workers are permanently disabled every week.

That’s where the schools project comes in.

“We’re hoping to get those numbers as low as possible,” says project manager Al Cornes, secretary-treasurer for the BC Labour Heritage Center.

The project provides a teachable moment for secondary students, he says. “We’re hoping that kids will gain a more serious appreciation of their first job, and their rights as workers.”

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To get that message across, the project this year provided high schools with scripts, posters, postcards, and a video for students. Leading up to the April 28 Day of Mourning, participating schools were encouraged to make daily announcements about workplace safety. And on the day of observance, principals were encouraged to address students and lead a moment of silence.

All materials were designed specifically for young workers, prominently featuring their peers. “Young people identify and empathize with other young people,” explains John Decaire, a teacher at Cariboo Secondary in Burnaby.

Decaire is the one who first came up with the idea for the project. The idea hit him one day when he asked his Grade 11 students how many of them had jobs. “Half the class raised their hands,” he recalls. “That was eye-opening for me.”

His “aha” moment was further shaped by knowing that all B.C. high school students need 30 hours of work experience to graduate. Inevitably, then, all of his students would be in the workplace at some point while cracking the books — and in need of education about health and safety.

Inspired by the annual Day of Mourning — “it should be right up there with Remembrance Day,”

he says — Decaire approached the BC Labour Heritage Centre with his idea.

It was an easy sell. “We see it as an extension of work we already have under way in schools,” says Cornes.


The project quickly became a partnership between the centre, WorkSafeBC, the BC Federation of Labour, and the BC Teachers’ Federation. The BC School Trustees Association and the Principals and Vice Principals Association also provided support.

Decaire piloted the project in his school last year, and then it was rolled out in more than 100 secondaries this spring.

The response? “In my school, it’s been all positive from staff and students,” he says.

It’s gone so well, in fact, that Decaire sees the project expanding down the road. “I’d like to see a modified version for elementary schools,” he says, since young people can legally enter B.C. workplaces at age 12.

WorkSafeBC’s McCloy also sees the project growing in the years ahead.

“Our goal for the future is to reach every high school in the province,” he says. “Ultimately, WorkSafeBC is trying to create a generation of safe workers.” 



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Contact: Cathy Cook, Executive Director P: 778-278-3486 F: 778-278-0029 E: ccook@bcmsa.ca